

Early Mail Robberies in the United States

by Steven J. Berlin, D.P.M. and James W. Milgram, M.D.

Robbery of the mail has always been considered to be a very serious crime. During the eighteenth century in England the sentence for mail robbery was death:

General Post Office, April 14, 1792

At the Lent Assizes, for the County of Cambridge, an Indictment was found by the Grand Jury against Spence Broughton and John Oxley for robbing the Cambridge Mail, near Bourn Bridge, on the 9th of June last; and at the same Assizes for the County of York an Indictment was likewise found against them for robbing the Mail between Sheffield and Rotherham on the 29 of January, 1791; on which last Indictment Broughton was tried and convicted.

Oxley escaped out of Clerkenwell Bridewell on the 31st of October last.

He is about Twenty-five Years of Age, Five Feet ten Inches high, pale faced, rather pitted with the Small Pox, and his Nose turned a little to the Right.

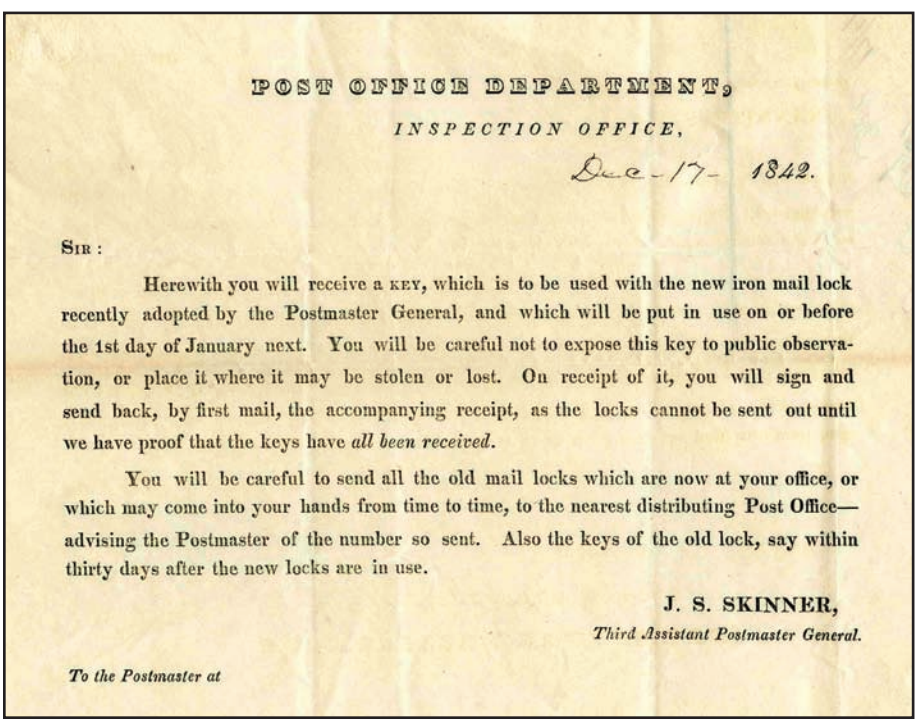
Whoever shall secure the said John Oxley and lodge him in any of the Gaols of this Kingdom, within Three Months from the Date hereof, will be entitled to a Reward of ONE HUNDRED POUNDS, to be paid immediately on his Commitment.

By Command of the Post Master General

Although his partner managed to escape prison, Spence Broughton faced the ultimate punishment for his crime:

Record Book
York Assizes Lent 1792
Spence Broughton — Guilty Highway Robbery —
To be Hanged

I do order that after the Execution of Spence Broughton his Body be hung in Chains on a Gibbet to be erected on some conspicuous Spot on Attercliffe Common in the County of York on the South of the Road leading from Sheffield to Rotherham not less than three hundred yards from the Road.



POST OFFICE DEPARTMENT,

INSPECTION OFFICE,

Dec-17- 1842.

SIR:

Herewith you will receive a KEY, which is to be used with the new iron mail lock recently adopted by the Postmaster General, and which will be put in use on or before the 1st day of January next. You will be careful not to expose this key to public observation, or place it where it may be stolen or lost. On receipt of it, you will sign and send back, by first mail, the accompanying receipt, as the locks cannot be sent out until we have proof that the keys have *all been received.*

You will be careful to send all the old mail locks which are now at your office, or which may come into your hands from time to time, to the nearest distributing Post Office—advising the Postmaster of the number so sent. Also the keys of the old lock, say within thirty days after the new locks are in use.

J. S. SKINNER,
Third Assistant Postmaster General.

To the Postmaster at

An 1842 circular from Post Office Department advising postmasters of the availability of new locks for the mail bags and how to exchange locks and keys from the existing supply held by them.

Although mail robbery was not considered a capital offence in the United States, convicted thieves were still sent to jail for long periods of time. The penalties for various crimes involving the mails were outlined in many of the early Postal Laws and Regulations (particularly the Act of March 3, 1825), while the 1843 Postal Laws and Regulations, Sec. 21 addressed in-house theft:

> ...if any such person, employed as aforesaid [*employed by Post Office Department*], shall steal, or take, any of the same out of any letter, packet, bag, or mail of letters, that shall come to his or her

possession, such person shall, on conviction for any such offence, be imprisoned not less than ten years, not exceeding 21 years….

The earliest physical evidence that we have located related to robbery of American letters is a stampless cover with New London, Connecticut, FREE postmark to the postmaster at Marblehead:

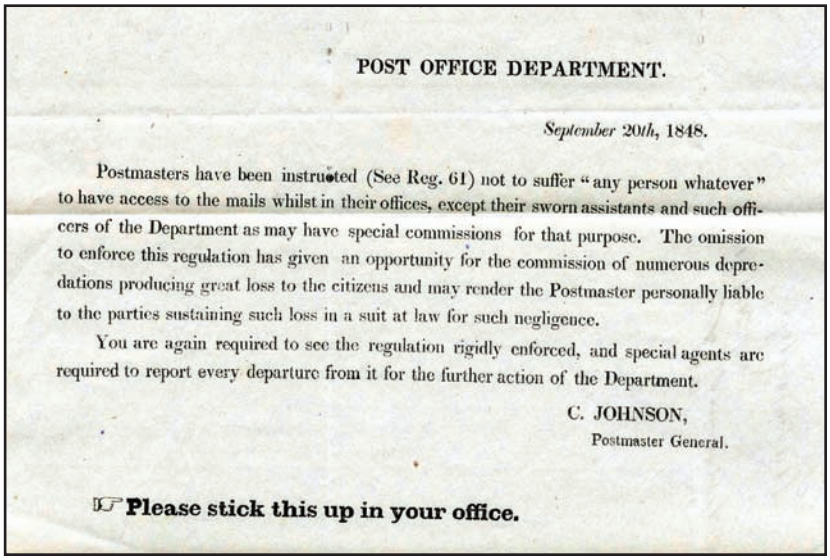
Post Office New London 16th April 1804
Sir

I am under the disagreeable necessity of informing you of an unfortunate circumstance which took place at the Stage House in this town some few nights since. Some villain broke into the House and entered the room where the mail portmanteaus were deposited and had proceeded so far in his design of Robery as to cut a hole in the portmanteau going westward and had pulled out the end of one of the Baggs and opened it. This bagg proved to be one containing quarterly accounts only amongst which (it is evident) was yours, as some papers have been found in the vicinity of this place that no doubt were taken out of the portmanteau, part of which were from your office consisting of a few letters which by the dates and postmarks were dead letters, also your account of letters received from other offices which is much defaced and mutilated by being cut or torn in such a manner as to render it almost unintelligible. I shall forward the peaces &c to the P.M.Genl. by the next mail and have given you this notice expecting that it is probable you may be requested by the P.M. Genl. to make out another sett. Fortunately the person who commited the depridation was ousted by the arrival of an extra stage and consequently did not succeed in getting what he wanted as I am confident he opened no other Bagg except the one mentioned, for answers have been returned to letters from this place from both East and West (that) were forwarded in the same mail.

As yet I have not been able to make any discovery who the person was but am using all diligence to detect him but almost dispare of success.

I am sir
Your most obdt.
Humble Servt.
Richard Douglass 2nd P.M.
P.M. Marblehead

A well-researched and documented article by Dr. Ralph R. Tingley in the March 8, 1952, issue of *The Weekly Philatelic Gossip*, entitled "Great Mail Robbery of 1823," describes how, in the early hours of July 8, 1823, one Patrick Green was serving as a guard on a mail coach from Havre de Grace, Maryland bound for Baltimore some forty miles to the southwest.



POST OFFICE DEPARTMENT.

September 20th, 1848.

Postmasters have been instructed (See Reg. 61) not to suffer "any person whatever" to have access to the mails whilst in their offices, except their sworn assistants and such officers of the Department as may have special commissions for that purpose. The omission to enforce this regulation has given an opportunity for the commission of numerous depredations producing great loss to the citizens and may render the Postmaster personally liable to the parties sustaining such loss in a suit at law for such negligence.

You are again required to see the regulation rigidly enforced, and special agents are required to report every departure from it for the further action of the Department.

C. JOHNSON,
Postmaster General.

☞ **Please stick this up in your office.**

An 1848 circular to post offices advising more diligent security surrounding the mails.

The coach met with a barricade erected across the road at a time between one and two o'clock in the morning. Three robbers assaulted the driver and guard, despite shots fired in their defense. The driver managed to escape, but the guard was knocked senseless by a pistol. When he awakened, he was beaten by the three thieves, who also threatened his life. The driver reappeared in the morning with help. Clues left at the scene led the pursuers to a blacksmith forge where they apprehended the owner of a shirt left at the site of the robbery and later arrested two others who were found to have been injured by the shots first fired by Mr. Green. Eventually all of the looted mail was reported to be recovered. The legal case of Patrick Green to gain compensation from the United



An 1841 letter from Canandaigua, New York, with two-line backstamp "BROKEN OPEN BY MAIL ROBBER, AT FREDONIA, DEC. 10, E.A. LESTER, P.M."



An 1843 postmark on a cover originating at Meadville, Pennsylvania, May 20, 1843 with "This letter was in the Mail that was robbed at Evans, N.Y., May 21st, 1843"; matching Buffalo, N.Y. postmark in blue.

States Government for his injuries was not settled for sixteen years and involved many acts of Congress.

In the 1840s much effort was made by the Post Office Department to curtail the loss of letters in the mails. One effort was to provide more secure surroundings for the mail. An 1842 circular to postmasters from the Third Assistant Postmaster General advised them that new locks and keys were available to better secure mail bags. At the same time, the regulations advised postmasters that the department would make every effort to investigate alleged charges of valuables lost in the mail. Complaints of loss in the mail were required to include detailed descriptions of when the letter was mailed, who mailed it, who received it, the address, the exact contents, etc.[1]

Another circular from a slightly later date discusses keeping the mails secure:

POST OFFICE DEPARTMENT
September 20th, 1848

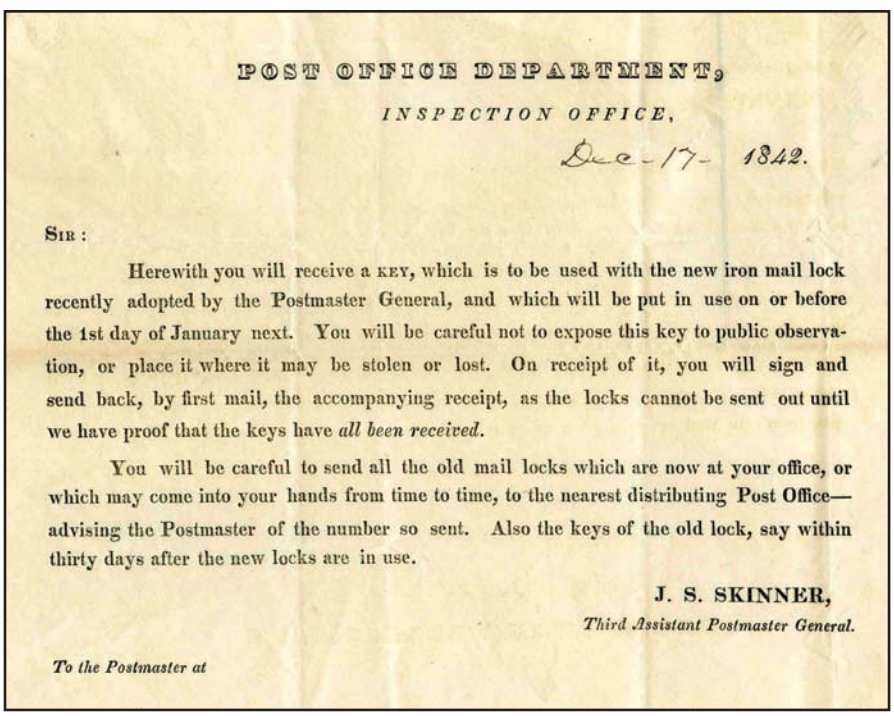
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You are again required to see the regulation rigidly enforced, and special agents are required to report every departure from it for the further action of the Department.

C. JOHNSON
Postmaster General.
Please stick this up in your office.

There are postal markings known on letters from two different mail robberies during this period. The earlier is a black two-line handstamp reading "BROKEN OPEN BY MAIL ROBBER AT FREDONIA DEC. 19 E.A. LESTER, PM." This marking is on the reverse of a stampless cover with 1841 letter written and postmarked "CANANDAIGUA N.Y. DEC 7" and "PAID" in red with written rate of 18¾ cents. The letter does discuss a debt but it is to the writer and no money is described as being enclosed. This cover is the earliest documented mail robbery artifact known from the United States. As with almost all of the markings and labels to be described in this article, only the single example is known.

The second marking is the best-known early mail robbery postmark — the blue two-line marking from the 1843 Evans, New York, mail robbery. The finest of the three known examples of this marking is shown. The marking was undoubtedly applied in Buffalo and matches the blue hue of that town's postmark. It reads: "This letter was in the Mail that was robbed at Evans,



POST OFFICE DEPARTMENT,

INSPECTION OFFICE,

Dec-17- 1842.

SIR:

Herewith you will receive a KEY, which is to be used with the new iron mail lock recently adopted by the Postmaster General, and which will be put in use on or before the 1st day of January next. You will be careful not to expose this key to public observation, or place it where it may be stolen or lost. On receipt of it, you will sign and send back, by first mail, the accompanying receipt, as the locks cannot be sent out until we have proof that the keys have *all been received.*

You will be careful to send all the old mail locks which are now at your office, or which may come into your hands from time to time, to the nearest distributing Post Office—advising the Postmaster of the number so sent. Also the keys of the old lock, say within thirty days after the new locks are in use.

J. S. SKINNER,
Third Assistant Postmaster General.

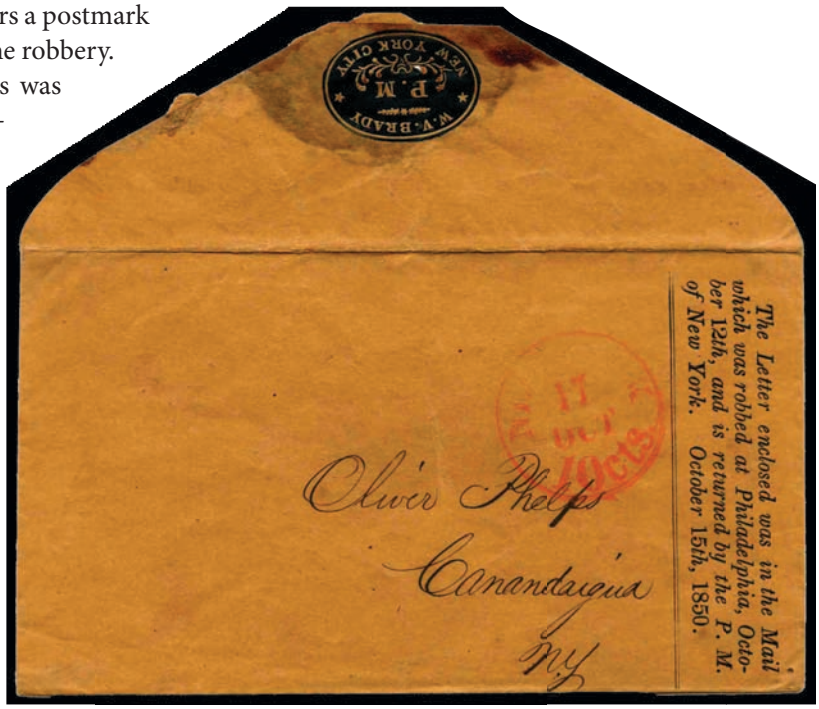
To the Postmaster at

An 1843 letter postmarked in red "WASHINGTON D.C. SEP 20" (1843) with "FREE" and manuscript "P.O. Dept" to a postmaster. The enclosed letter was from the Mail Depredations Desk of the P.O.D.

N.Y., May 21st, 1843." The cover illustrated also bears a postmark "MEADVILLE Pa. MAY 20" from the day before the robbery. Note that the 25 rate marking is crossed out; this was probably done at Syracuse, not Buffalo, because another of the three known covers does not show the rate change.

The story of the robbery was documented from newspaper accounts by Adolph Steeg and a relative of his, and was reported by David L. Jarrett in *The Chronicle of the U.S. Classic Postal Issues*.[2] Briefly, the Buffalo *Commercial Advertiser* reported that a mail bag sent between Erie, Pennsylvania, and Buffalo was found in the woods with some 400 letters "in a very wet mouldy condition which will be forwarded to their points of destination as soon as possible." Evidently the sending of the mails was so sloppy that the mail bag had never been missed by the contractor.

The Post Office Department had a group of special investigators who dealt with lost mail during the 1840s. A letter from 1843 gives us an insight as to how the postal inspectors of the day handled these cases. The letter is from a specialist at the Mail Depredations Desk of the Post Office and quotes an earlier letter written to him:



An 1850 cover from New York postmaster with printed notice that the contents consist of a letter recovered from a Mail Robbery of three days earlier (the letter is not present).

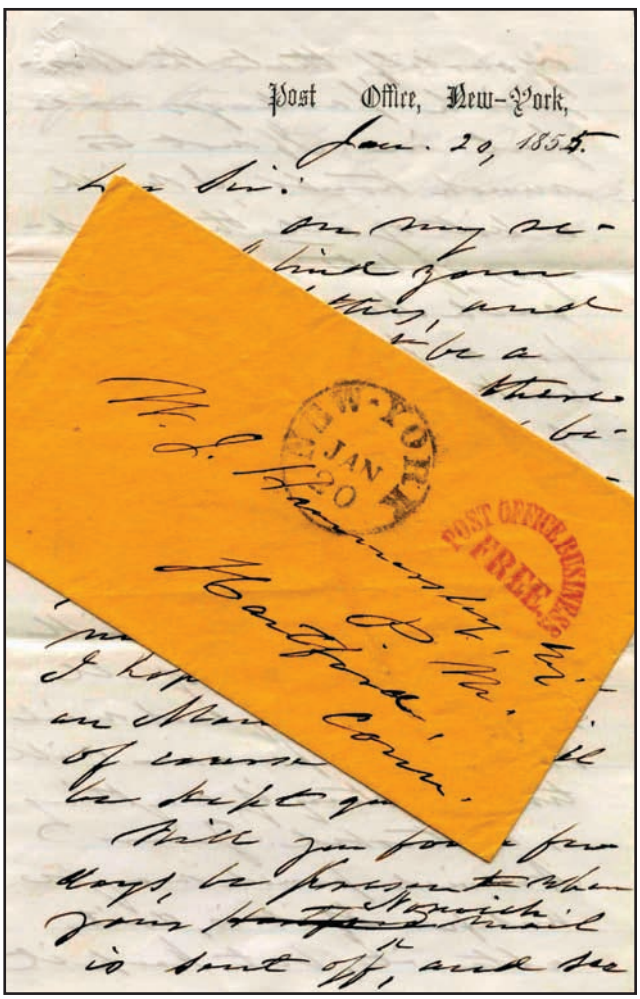
Copy
Samuel B. Beach Esq.
Special Agent P.O. Dept. Wilton Ct. Sep.6, 1843
Dr. Sir

I duly recd. your favor of July 7 dated at Oneonta, N.Y. I gave Mr. Hoyt a copy of the same & sent one to the P M General. The Mr. Northrop who said he mailed $70 on the 30th March last at Jordan in a letter directed to S. S. Hoyt of this place, has been and I believe is now in this place with his Brother in law Samuel Morgan, and I am informed have made affidavit before a Justice of having mailed the money in question: they have not called on me nor do I think they will. I have not seen their affidavits nor been able to procure a copy. I am told that they state that you found such bad management about the Jordan Post Office that you have procured or are taking steps to procure Mr. Mason's removal. Mr. Northrop, I am informed, insinuated to Mr. Mason that I had taken the money, and now here insinuates all manner of things about Mr. Mason. I feel a desire to protect the innocent and confound the guilty, whoever it may be. I will therefore be much obliged if you will give me all the particulars in your power as to the state of affairs at Jordan in relation to this case. Did you examine Mr. Mason, Mr. Northrop & the Morgans?

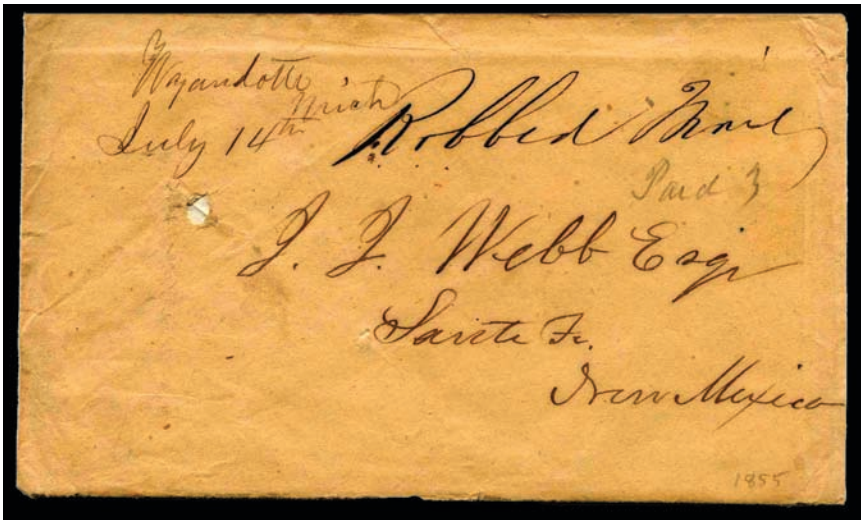
(signed) Saml. F. Lambirt, P.M.
Mail Depredation Desk

September 20, 1843
Sir,

In compliance with the request in yours of the 18th instant, I send you, above, a copy of yours to me, of the 6th instant. As to the affidavit of which you send me a copy, it may be every word true, and yet no money sent. You will observe that it says



An 1855 letter with matching cover bearing red arch "POST OFFICE BUSINESS FREE" and black "NEW – YORK JAN 20" by James Holbrook, Special Agent of the P.O.D.



An 1855 cover from Wyandotte, Michigan, July 14th that shows evidence of water soaking of the envelope and enclosed letter. The words "Robbed Mail" are written across the top, including where the stamp had been placed.

"I saw money in the letter", but don't say how much; nor does he say that the "money" continued in the letter when he "sealed it" or when he "put it in the Post Office."

In short, there are a dozen facts and circumstances which have already completely satisfied my mind (and I have had great experience in such matters,) that the money was not in the letter when it was put in the Jordan Post Office.

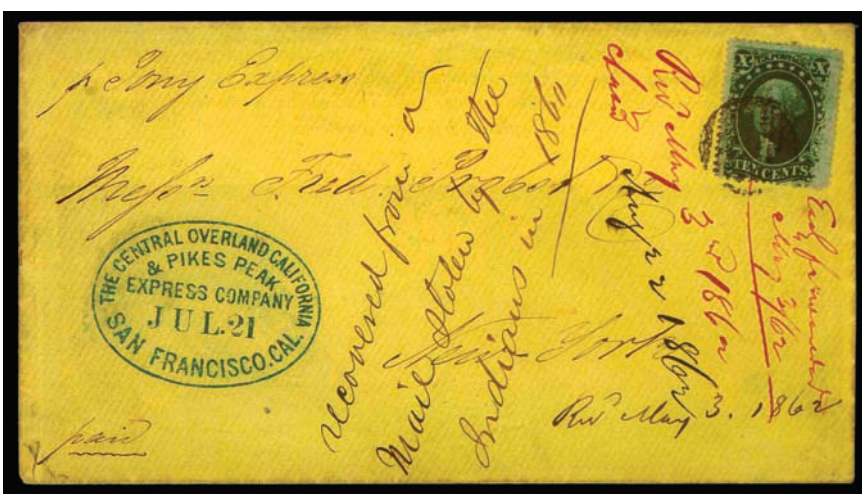
Respectfully,
Samuel B. Beach
Mail Depredations Clerk
Postmaster
Wilton, Ct.

The third cover concerning a mail robbery is a return envelope from W.V. Brady, Postmaster at New York City (his name is shown in the blue cameo cornercard on the back-flap of the envelope). Printed on the right side of the face of the envelope is "The Letter enclosed was in the Mail which was robbed at Philadelphia, October 12th, and is returned by the P.M. of New York. October 15th, 1850." There is a faint red "NEW – YORK 15 OCT 10 cts." Newspaper clippings about this robbery are excerpted in full in Dr. Milgram's 1997 article.[3] It was a robbery of a train. Considerable currency had been present in some of the letters; the robbers left the letters, taking only the money. Later issues of the newspaper describe the arrest of some of the robbers who, in turn, implicated others.

There is a fascinating book on the subject of early mail robberies entitled *Ten Years Among the Mail Bags or Notes from the Diary of a Special Agent of the Post Office Department* by J. Holbrook.[4] The book also contains a number of illustrations made to complement the stories told in print. More about this book and its contents are to be found in Dr. Milgram's article, which describes one letter from Holbrook in which he prepared a decoy letter for a would-be mail robber. Since then, three other letters by Holbrook have surfaced. These letters were all sent from New York and were enclosed in official business envelopes. They discuss mail losses between Willimantic, Connecticut, and New York and include his suspicion that the robberies could be localized to between Hartford and Norwich. The first letter discusses his book and thanks the postmaster for help in the facts of one of the previous cases to be described in the book. It is obvious that Holbrook embellished some of the stories to make them more interesting.

Next are two covers to and from Santa Fe, New Mexico Territory in 1855, each of which contains the original letter and shows the words "Robbed Mail" in manuscript on the front of the envelope. The very different dates indicate two separate mail robberies, probably at the same location or at least certainly involving the same mail route. The earlier of the two has a manuscript Wyandotte, Michigan July 14th (1855) date with a stamp missing from the upper right corner of the envelope where "Robbed Mail" has been written. The pencil "Paid 3" appears to be old and was probably applied after the robbery but before delivery at Santa Fe, giving credit for a lost three-cent stamp. Effective April 1, 1855, the rate for a letter under 3000 miles was three cents. The contents of this letter are just personal news. Nothing of value is mentioned as an enclosure.

The second letter is in poorer condition. It is an envelope going the reverse direction, west to east, with a stamp missing where the "SANTA FE N.MEX" postmark was struck. The address is to Mr. James J. Webb, who was a famous trader in Santa



An 1860 Pony Express letter with 10-cent Type V tied by a grid to an envelope "recovered from a Mail stolen by the Indians in 1860."



REWARD!

WELLS, FARGO & CO'S

Express was Robbed this Morning, between Ione Valley and Galt, by two men, described as follows:

One elderly, heavy set, and sandy complexion. The other tall, slim, and dark complexion.

$200 Each and one-fourth of the Treasure recovered, will be paid for the ***arrest*** and ***conviction*** of the robbers.

JNO. J. VALENTINE, Gen. Supt.

San Francisco, May 3d, 1875.



Above: An 1862 cover from Corvallis, Oregon, torn open through the stamp by mail robber. Written notation "San Francisco 14 Aug. 1863 Opened by a Mail Robber. Henry Baker Special Agt. P.O. Dpt."

Left: An 1875 wanted poster for a Wells Fargo & Co. stage coach robbery in 1875.

Fe, but must have been visiting in Kent, Connecticut. "Robbed Mail" is written across the top of the envelope including where the stamp was once glued. The letter in this cover, although not relevant to the precise mail robbery which overtook this letter, paints a nice picture of politics in the rough country that included Santa Fe as its chief town:

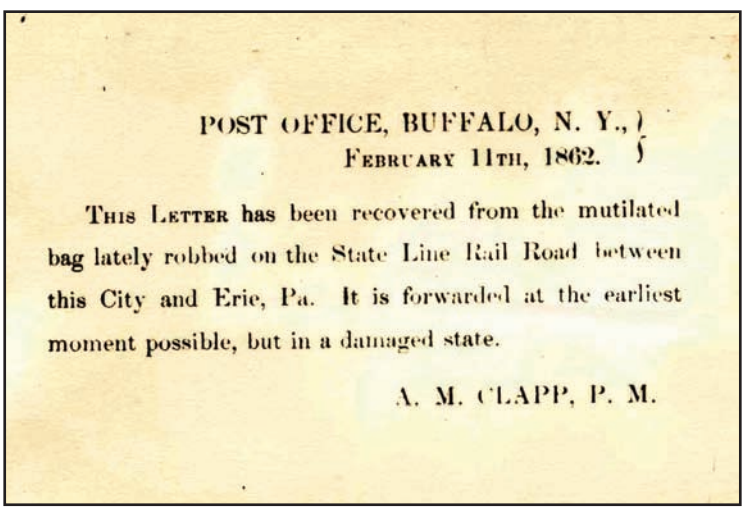
Santa Fe, New Mexico
September 27th, 1855
My dear sir:

I embrace a few moments of leisure, this morning, to write you according to promise…. Since you left the workmen have worked as though they had all time to come, in which to finish the building, and neither coaxing nor persuasion would make them accelerate their speed. I believe they have done nothing at your side of the house, since you left, and if it shall be finished by the time you return next summer, you may consider it a fortunate circumstance [*Webb had the great trading post in Santa Fe*].

The election is over, and Mr. Gallegos is elected by a clear majority of ninety nine votes. There was considerable excitement as the returns were coming in, as the contest was a close one; and Madam rumour declared each candidate elected several times. The Whigs are a good deal down in the mouth, and Otero talks of contesting. Some of his friends committed the greatest outrage ever perpetrated in this Territory, in an election contest. Ashurst, Hovey, Redman, James Owens, Cherokee Bill and Pelham's man, armed with six shooters, met Clark on the road, as he



Front of 1862 cover showing considerable staining, although the stamp is still intact.



POST OFFICE, BUFFALO, N. Y.,
FEBRUARY 11TH, 1862.

THIS LETTER has been recovered from the mutilated bag lately robbed on the State Line Rail Road between this City and Erie, Pa. It is forwarded at the earliest moment possible, but in a damaged state.

A. M. CLAPP, P. M.

Label on reverse of cover describing how the letter was damaged and recovered from a mail robbery on the State Line Railroad in upper New York state.



Label on front of stamped envelope said to have been robbed by a mail clerk and held as evidence in his trial. The letter was being forwarded because the trial was over.

was bringing the poll-books and returns from Rio Arriba, and forcibly took them from him. Two of the number brought them down to Santa Fe the same evening, while the others continued on to Clark's house to endeavor to get the duplicates of his wife. Clark and Wheaton, who was with him, came in here, got out a warrant for their arrest and with a posse returned in pursuit of them. Ashurst and gang reached Clark's house early the next morning, and demanded the poll-book which Mrs. C. refused to deliver up. He tried to bully her, when she armed the peons and told him he would attempt to take them at his peril. He then went for an officer to frighten her into it, and while gone Clark and posse arrived, and when they returned nabbed the whole of them. There were brought to Santa Fe the same evening and admitted to bail. They were indicted the present term, plead guilty, and the Judge fined them only five dollars. What a farce!...

Truly yours
W.W. H. Davis

Certainly the most valuable robbed mail artifact is the Pony Express cover from the Boyd and Lichtenstein collection sold by H.R. Harmer on May 14, 2004. This cover shows a Central Overland California & Pikes Peak Express Company oval dated July 21 (1860) with manuscript "pr Pony Express." But across the address is the written notation "recovered from a Mail stolen by the Indians in 1860," and the letter was not received until May 3, 1862, almost two years later. A man called Howard Ranson Egan wrote, "Later I got it from friendly Indians that there had been a trap set to catch an Express rider for the purpose of seeing what he carried to make him travel so fast." This was evidently the only mail ever lost on the Pony Express to robbery.

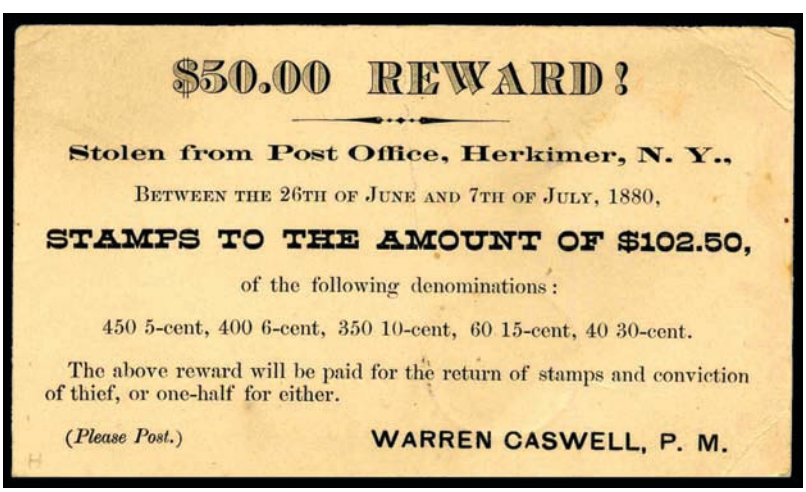
Also illustrated is a typical wanted poster for a stage coach robbery. While most of the time it was treasure that the robbers were after, they did not hesitate to pilfer the mails when they could. We have not seen any letters that were definitely from a western stage coach robbery, but we do not know the circumstances surrounding the robbery of one letter shown. This cover originally bore a 10-cent green stamp tied "CORVALLIS O.R. JUN 30 1862." The mail robber tore the letter open right through the stamp to get at the contents. On the front of the envelope in magenta ink is written: "San Francisco 14 Aug. 1863. Opened by a Mail Robber. Henry Baker Special Agt. P.O. Dept." The number "40" is found in the upper right corner, perhaps relating to a number it was given by the Post Office special agent.

While no mention of this particular robbery can be found in J. Holbrook's *United States Mail and Post Office Assistant*, a monthly journal for postmasters started in October 1860 by him, many other tales of different types of mail robberies are described. In the December 1860 issue, under a heading "Legal Penalties," Holbrook quotes from the current Postal Laws:

> For robbing a mail carrier, or any person legally entrusted with the mail, imprisonment not less than five years, nor exceeding ten years…. If the life of the carrier is put in jeopardy , or he is wounded, the penalty is death.

Other penalties included that for an unsuccessful attempt to rob a mail (two to ten years imprisonment); stealing or taking from a post office (two to ten years, if item was not valuable, plus a fine of $500, and imprisonment not to exceed twelve months); and mutilating a mail bag with intent to rob (one to three years imprisonment).

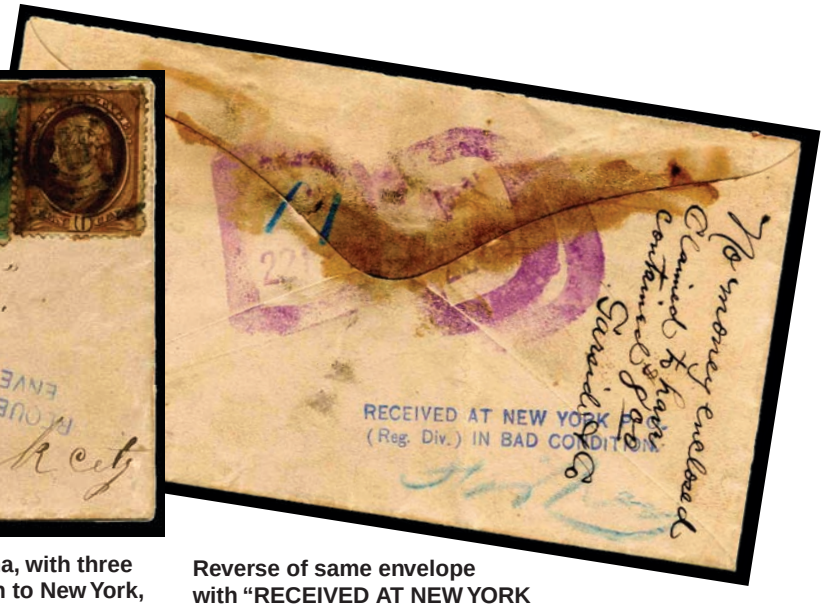
The subject of robbing the mail of Union soldiers was especially condemned by Holbrook in later issues. Although no such artifact actually documented to have been robbed appears to exist from a soldier, one of Holbrook's reports



Postcards as reward posters are really the most common philatelic artifacts showing robberies. This 1880 card is unusual in that the robbery was from a post office and the objects taken were stamps.



An 1883 registered envelope from Macedonia, South Carolina, with three 3-cent stamps and a 10-cent for a triple rate with registration to New York, New York. The cover bears a handstamp: "REQUEST EXAMINATION ON DELIVERY. OBTAIN ENVELOPE IF IRREGULARITY IS REPORTED."



Reverse of same envelope with "RECEIVED AT NEW YORK P.O. (Reg. Div.) IN BAD CONDITION." The envelope shows extensive staining from being steamed open and reglued. Notation of loss written at edge.

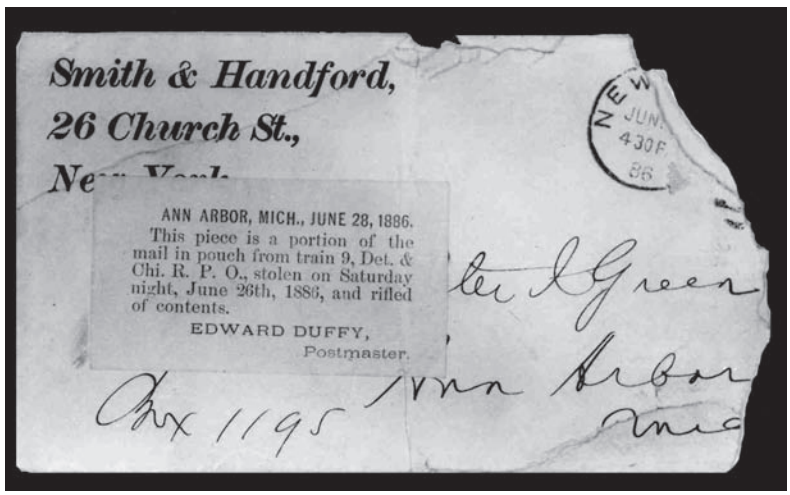
on the topic from the July 1863 issue gives details of a specific plot to rob soldiers' mail:

Speedy Justice

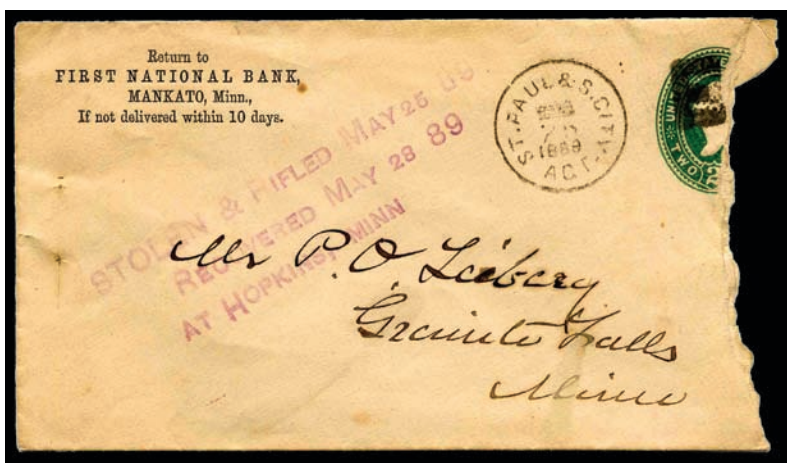
A rare case of conviction, under the Act of March 3, 1825, relating to offences against the Post Office Department, took place in the United States District Court, at Williamsport, Pennsylvania on the 18th of June [1863].…

The principal witness was Henry W. Fletcher, a lad about 13 years of age, son of the postmaster at Jackson, Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania…. He testified that a man named Pardon Barrett, and another … suggested to him that as the boys in the Army were sending home money, he might have the luck to get some, if he were to take letters out of the post office. In order to entice him into the commission of the offence, these wicked men not only agreed to "see him out of the scrape," if he should happen to be detected, but they "promised to take him to Buffalo, and thence across the Lake into Canada, where, as one of them remarked, "nobody could find them."

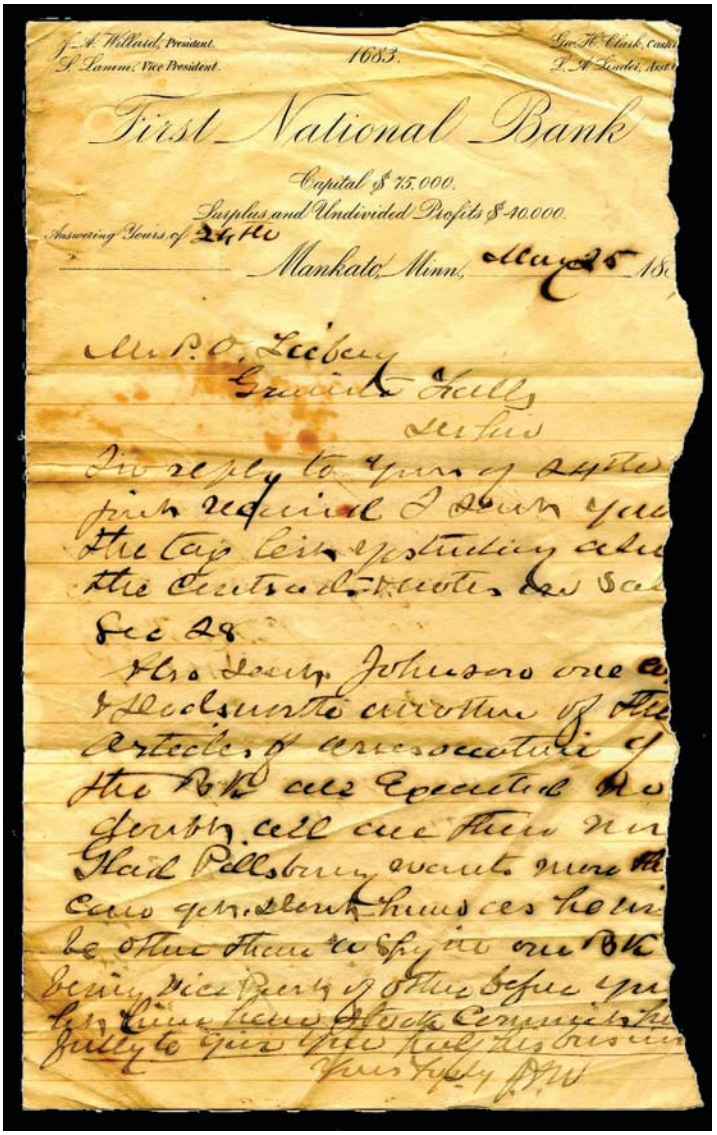
Barrett, as the boy testified, gave him definite instructions how to proceed. Jackson having but a semi-weekly mail … he was to take only such packages as were passing through the Jackson office, and these were to be confined to such as contained letters mailed at Washington City. The first package which the boy abstracted was taken out in the early part of May. He succeeded in getting $20, two of the letters having each a $10 U.S. Treasury note in them…. [He] reported the fact to Barrett, who said "Good, you had pretty good luck; keep it a-going!". And the lad did "keep it a-going" until he had abstracted upwards of forty letters, out of which he realized $224 in money….



Envelope that has been torn open to gain access to contents. The mail was stolen from a train near Ann Arbor, the intended destination of this letter, as explained in a post office label of June 28, 1886.



Postal entire postmarked "ST. PAUL & S. CITY AGT MAY 25 1889" that has been torn open. It has been stamped "STOLEN & RIFLED MAY 25 89 RECOVERED MAY 28 89 AT HOPKINS, MINN".



The letter enclosed within this envelope also was torn by the thief. The water staining and wrinkling indicate the letter may have been exposed. Other examples of the handstamp are present on the reverse blank side of this letter. It is possible that the envelope and its contents were separated as a result of the robbery and rejoined later. That would also explain the presence of the handstamps on the letter as well as the envelope.

> The boy was corroborated in his statement … by other witnesses … the letters which were not entirely destroyed were found at the place he designated. The bulk of the money ($169) was found.... There were other circumstances brought to light, but enough has already been narrated to give a correct idea of the case…. [Barrett] was put on trial; the next day the Jury rendered a verdict of guilty….

Other cases involved robbery in the Army camps and in the hospitals, but the most serious charges were brought against General Winder, the Confederate general responsible for prisoner exchange, who was accused with good documentation of removing gold from letters going to Union officers in prisoner of war camps.

A example of a railroad mail robbery from the same period can be seen in a water-stained cover originally mailed at Williamsfield, Ohio, and destined for Parma Center, New York. The printed label on its reverse reads:

> Post Office, Buffalo, N.Y.,
> February 11th, 1862.
> This letter has been received from the mutilated bag lately robbed on the State Line Rail Road between this City and Erie, Pa. It is forwarded at the earliest moment possible, but in a damaged state.
> A.M. Clapp, P.M.

Another instance of employee theft from this era is exemplified by a cover with a Mobile, Alabama, cancellation. There is also a "pd 2/-" notation, which is a notation frequently seen on express covers and signifies 25 cents. The story is told by the label, which documents the letter as one of 400 robbed by a mail clerk and one that had been part of the evidence used against the accused. When the trial was over and the culprit sentenced, the letter was being forwarded to the original addressee by the Post Office Special Agent:

> MOBILE, ALA., March 18, 1867.
> This letter is one of near *four hundred* which were opened in the Postoffice at Camden, Wilcox county,

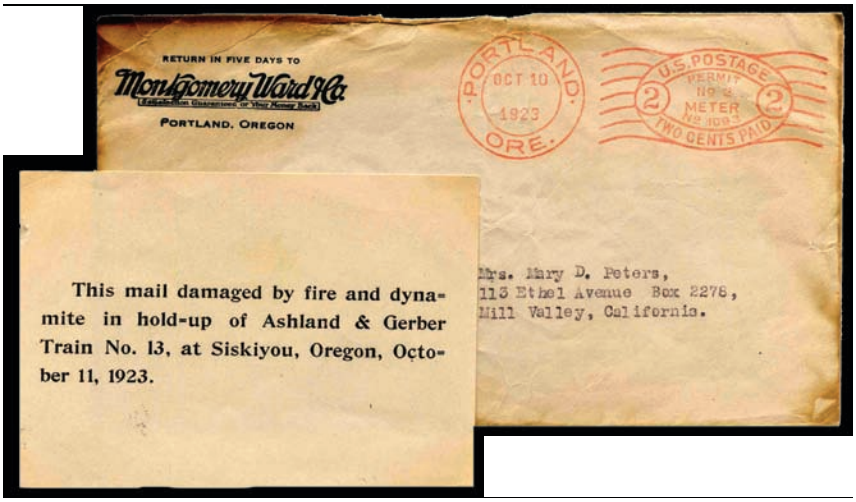


An 1895 envelope bearing the notation "Rifled by highwayman near Oak Run Calif. July 7th 95." There are several officially sealed stamps tied by San Francisco postmarks but torn by reopening. A 48 x 30 mm magenta oval handstamp is present to the left of the address: "OFFICE of P.O. INSPECTOR P.O. DEPT. JUL 18 1895 SAN FRANCISCO CAL."

Ala., on the 14th and 15th of May last, and which have been held as evidence on the trial of WALTER R. PRIMM, a clerk in said office, who has this day been convicted and sentenced to the Penitentiary for ten years for the crime.

HARRISON REED,
Special Agent P.O. Dep't.

Government postcards offering a reward for stolen items are frequently seen from the 1870s through the 1890s. Most of these reward postcards deal with stolen objects or animals, and they are not rare. The 1880 card illustrated is from a post office at Herkimer, New York, and offers a $50 reward for stolen stamps. While stealing stamps is not quite the same as stealing the mail, this does demonstrate a post office robbery.



Label with burned envelope and contents from the train robbery by the De Autremont brothers. There was also a return envelope.

The registered letter illustrated shows a soiled envelope addressed to New York City, which is backstamped "RECEIVED AT NEW YORK P.O. (Reg. Div.) IN BAD CONDITION." The envelope's poor condition evidently made a clerk in the Registry Division suspect that the letter might have been opened. He stamped the cover with a special postmark: "REQUEST EXAMINATION ON DELIVERY. OBTAIN ENVELOPE IF IRREGULARITY IS REPORTED." That appears to have been what happened because on the back is written "No money enclosed. Claimed to have contained $8.00 Garside & Co." — Garside Jewelry Company is the addressee.

A collection of official Post Office seals offered in the Christie's auction of September 28, 1988, contained two additional examples of registered letters bearing both of these handstamps (lots 1923 and 1927). In addition, five lots (1932, 1933, 1936 ,1937, and 1944) from the same sale have, instead of the second handstamp, a small pink label with the same text suggesting that the envelope should be obtained in the case of irregularity. Those covers with the labels are later usages from the 1890s. All of these covers show markings of the New York post office's registry division. Other covers in this sale included registered covers that were received in bad condition and were opened to ascertain that the contents were intact.

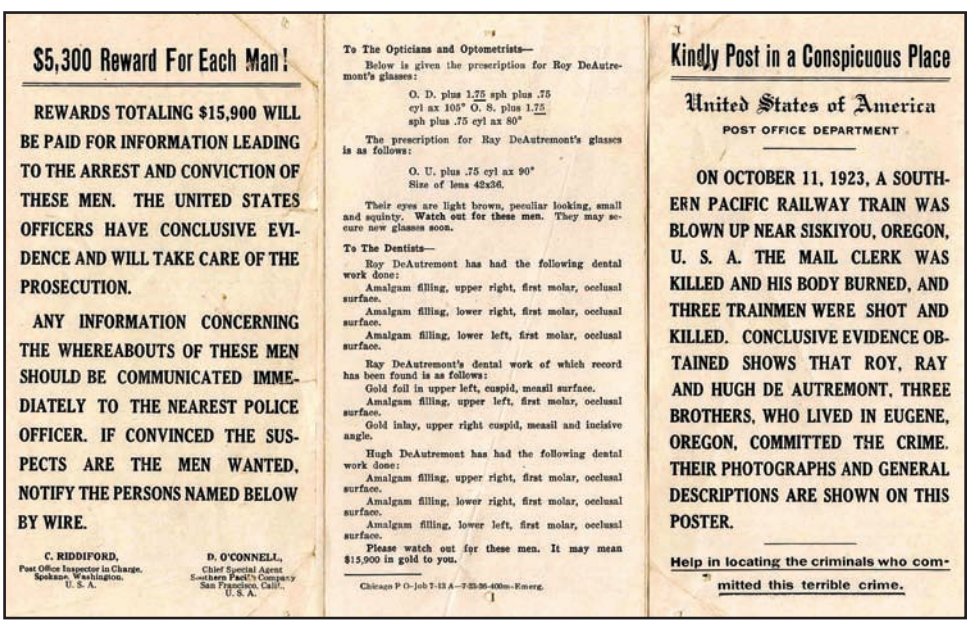
Another letter shows evidence of a violent opening where the stamp was removed. Although it was mailed from New York City, the mail pouch containing it was stolen from a train. The ransacked, recovered mail eventually was delivered to the proper addressees with an explanatory label from the Ann Arbor, Michigan, Postmaster:

ANN ARBOR, MICH., JUNE 28, 1886.

This piece is a portion of the mail in a pouch from train 9, Det. & Chi. R.P.O., stolen on Saturday night, June 26th, 1886, and rifled of contents.

EDWARD DUFFY,
Postmaster

A stamped envelope from the First National Bank of Mankato, Minnesota, with a "ST. PAUL & S.CITY AGT MAY 25 1889" postmark, was torn through on the right side, tearing the contents of the letter at the same time. Both the envelope and the reverse side of the letter itself bear multiple strikes of a purple three-line handstamp: "STOLEN & RIFLED MAY 25 89 RECOVERED MAY 28 89 AT HOPKINS, MINN." The letter is wrinkled and stained, which indicates it was probably exposed to the elements and may have been



Three panels of the mailed wanted poster showing rewards and describing the robbery itself. The poster was to be displayed on the wall of the post office to which it was sent.



$15,900 REWARD IN GOLD!

ROY A. A. DE AUTREMONT.
(Picture taken early in 1923.)

Roy A. A. DeAutremont, alias R. A. Harris, alias R. A. Burton, age 23 in 1923; weight 135-140 pounds; height 5 feet 6 inches. Complexion medium light. Hair medium light brown. Eyes peculiar looking, narrow and squinty, light brown. Wears glasses in reading. Face broad at the cheek bones. Nervous, and a "dreamer." Likes to argue against the Bible. Long, turned up nose and prominent nostrils. Tonsils have been removed. Head round. Wears No. 6 shoe. Boastful and egotistical. Clips his words. Forward and presuming with women. First upper right molar tooth has amalgam filling, as have both first right and left lower molars.

RAY CHARLES DE AUTREMONT.
(Picture taken in 1920. He now resembles closely his twin brother Roy.)

Ray DeAutremont, alias R. C. Burton, alias William Elliott, alias Chas. R. Joseph, age 23 in 1923. Height 5 feet 6 inches. Weight 135-140 pounds. Complexion medium light. Hair medium light brown. Broad face. Prominent nostrils. Short cut neck. Eyes, peculiar looking, light brown, small and squinty. Wears glasses when reading. Big toe nail on left foot turned up. Cut scar at tip of left forefinger inner, and at back of second joint right middle finger, also round cut scar back of head. Gold foil in upper left cuspid, measil surface. Amalgam filling, upper left first molar, occlusal surface. Gold inlay, upper right cuspid, measil and incisive angle.

HUGH DE AUTREMONT.
(Picture taken in 1923.)

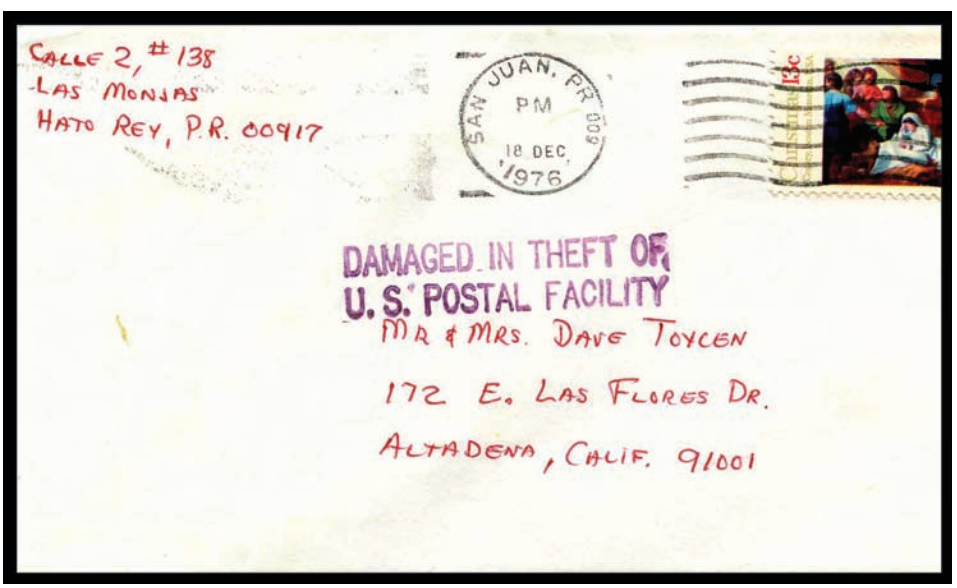
Hugh DeAutremont, alias E. E. James, alias Hugh DeKay, alias Hugh DeLerious, alias Hugh DeCoy. Age 19 in 1923, looks older. Height 5 feet 7 inches. Weight about 135 pounds. Complexion fair, eyes blue Nose slightly pug. Hair medium light, slightly sandy and curly. Amalgam filling right and left molars, and same in first right upper molar. Likes to argue and is good debater. Fond of sports, particularly boxing and running. Expressed desire for traveling, and has boasted of trips he has made by riding freight trains. He is bright and alert and has a high school education. Little fingers turn outward at first joint.

Views of the three De Autremont brothers along with their descriptions.

separated from its envelope. However, despite its promising return address, the robber gained nothing of value from this particular envelope.

The final nineteenth century cover shown is a large envelope that bears a handwritten notation: "Rifled by highwayman near Oak Run Calif. July 7th 95." The envelope shows evidence of being officially sealed by Post Office personnel, but does not contain its original contents. Since it only bore one stamp, it probably had no contents other than a one-page letter. A light strike in magenta of a handstamp appears to the left of the address: "OFFICE of P. O. INSPECTOR P.O. DEPT. JUL 18 1895 SAN FRANCISCO CAL." This is the same date as the San Francisco postmark tying the Officially Sealed labels.

Because of its notoriety, we have decided to show an early twentieth-century robbed letter, an artifact of the famous train robbery by the De Autremont brothers — 19-year-old Hugh and the 23-year-old twins Ray and Roy. Having heard a rumor that on October 11, 1923, the Southern Pacific Express would be carrying a half million dollars in gold plus cash, the brothers planned a robbery to take place at Tunnel 13 just north of the California/Oregon border, where the train had to slow for the grade. Roy, having no experience with explosives, set off too large a charge of dynamite, blowing the mail car to bits and incinerating mail clerk Elvyn E. Dougherty, who had locked himself inside the car. Three other railroad employees, who had come running back the tunnel to see what was happening, were murdered before the brothers made their escape. The fire and smoke had made it impossible for them to search for valuables in the remains of the mail car; as the youngest brother, Hugh, would later admit, "It was all for nothing."



A 1976 cover mailed with a 13-cent stamp from Puerto Rico to California. The envelope was cut through the stamp. There is a bold handstamp: "DAMAGED IN THEFT OF U.S. POSTAL FACILITY."

A wanted poster for the perpetrators of this train robbery was widely circulated by mail. It opens to show five different panels and was printed on both sides. Selected portions of each side of the poster/circular that describe what happened and show pictures of the three brothers. It was four years before the men were captured, brought to trial, and sentenced to life imprisonment. Roy had a mental breakdown in 1949 and was lobotomized. Hugh was paroled in 1958 and died of cancer a short time later. Ray, who had planned the holdup, had his sentence commuted in 1972; he died in 1984.

Covers from this robbery show varying degrees of being burned; some are more burned than the example illustrated Each recovered letter was mailed in an official Post Office Department penalty envelope together with a white label reading, "This mail damaged by fire and dynamite in holdup of Ashland & Gerber Train No. 13, at Siskiyou, Oregon, October 11, 1923."

More recent mail showing evidence of theft is pretty rare. A final cover is from Puerto Rico to Altadena, California, and bears a magenta handstamp reading "DAMAGED IN THEFT OF U.S. POSTAL FACILITY." Note that, like the robbed mail letters of an earlier date, this envelope was cut right through the stamp in order to gain access to its contents, which are not present.

Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful to Eliot Landau, Van Koppersmith, and Jerome Krause for the loan of several of the items shown.

Endnotes

1. Dr. Milgram has postulated in his book, *United States Registered Mail 1845–1870* (N. Miami, FL: David G. Phillips Publ. Co., 1998), that these new regulations were responsible for an informal system of registering letters termed by him "Unofficial Registration" that is well-documented to have existed in all parts of the United States, even California, from 1845 to mid-1855 when official registered mail commenced. Other early Post Office regulations are described in Dr. Milgram's earlier article on this subject "Robbery of Mail in the Classic Period," *The Chronicle of the U.S. Classics Postal Issues* 49 (1997): 232.
2. David L. Jarrett in *The Chronicle of the U.S. Classic Postal Issues* 24 (1972): 177.
3. James W. Milgram, M.D., "Robbery of Mail in the Classic Period," *The Chronicle of the U.S. Classics Postal Issues* 49 (1997): 232.
4. J. Holbrook, *Ten Years Among the Mail Bags or Notes from the Diary of a Special Agent of the Post Office Department* (Philadelphia: H. Cowperthwait & Co., 1855).

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